

Redistricting session shapes future elections

ES - 1 2011
SAT MAR 20 2011

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BATON ROUGE — State lawmakers begin a process today that will play a major role in deciding which candidates you can vote for in future state and federal elections.

The special legislative session starting at 5 p.m. and running for the next 24 days will decide election districts that could shift where you vote and whether the person you voted for three years ago will still be your state representative or senator, congressman, public service commissioner or BESE member the next time you vote.

Because of population shifts documented by the 2010 Census, the numbers of residents in some current election districts have swollen but in others, particularly in New Orleans, shrank.

It's possible that you could be shifted to a different election district or, depending on where you live, that your favorite elected official doesn't even have a district to run in any more.

"I think emotions could run high," says Pearson Cross, the head of the political science department at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

However, he expects the session could be a "huge exercise in incumbent protection" so "people who can come back will (have) comfortable districts."

But House and Senate members drawing up the plans for how future state and federal lawmakers are

elected have to keep watch that they don't go too far, Cross said.

Louisiana's election laws and any changes in election districts have to be reviewed and cleared by the U.S. Department of Justice because the state is one of many that fall under the Voting Rights Act that assures fair representation to minorities. Many states are included because of prior discriminatory laws.

That provision, which could cause rejection of proposed districts, "is going to tamp down emotions," Cross said.

State Rep. Nancy Landry, R-Lafayette, who is a member of the House and Gov-



Landry

ernmental Affairs Committee that's drawing new districts, said one thing is obvious from the Census numbers: "There is going to be a power shift."

For decades, the New Orleans area has wielded the most stroke in the Legislature through the sheer number of lawmakers, due to it being the most populous area of the state.

But many people who evacuated the city at the time of Hurricane Katrina never came back.

Since the numbers aren't there to support as many state representatives and senators, some of the districts will have to be dissolved and new ones established in areas that experienced growth — some of which is due to New Orleans evacuees relocating to other parts of the state.